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SWOT: What's it all about and how to use it?

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Abstract.

This article examines the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis tool commonly known as SWOT and how support workers can utilise this in decision making, problem-solving and in identifying where changes in clinical practice are needed. The importance of this will be highlighted in the relevant sections of The Code of Conduct for Healthcare Support Workers and Adult Social Care Workers in England (Skills for Care and Skills for Health, 2013) and for nursing associates in the recently amended NMC (2018) code. The article will start with an overview of the SWOT analysis tool before examining the four separate parts. The importance of the analysis stage will be highlighted.

Key Words: Analysis, Opportunities, Strengths, Support Workers, SWOT, Threats, Weaknesses.

Introduction

Support workers are key to the delivery of high quality care to patients. They are closest to patient care and therefore know the needs of their patient's best and how their organisations operate from the ground up. They are best placed to identify where change is needed and where decisions need to be made. One way in which to ensure that the right decisions and changes are being implemented is in utilising a decision making tool such as SWOT. There are other tools available, for example PESTLE (Taylor et al, 2015), or SPECTACLES (Pettinger, 2012), however SWOT analysis has been chosen as being simpler, having only four components, and as Marquis and Huston (2017) state, it is recognised as being both effective and commonly used in healthcare organisations. The SWOT analysis tool can be used for a whole range of applications. For managers "to scan their external environment to identify opportunities and threats so that their internal strengths and weaknesses are aligned accordingly" (Sola et al, 2018:136), to assisting support workers in writing their Professional Development Plans by identifying "areas in which development is required or desired" (Jackson & Thurgate, 2011:293) and by a learner within the workplace to identify opportunities within their environment (Wareing, 2016).

Code Words.

The Code of Conduct for Healthcare Support Workers and Adult Social Care Workers in England (Skills for Care and Skills for Health, 2013), section 2.1 states that you must “always act in the best interests of people who use health and care services.” To act in your patients best interests means always delivering care which is of the highest possible standard. To do this your care and practice must be evidence based and be open to regular scrutiny. Evidence based practice is defined as practice which is “based on the best available evidence, patient preferences and clinical judgement” (Schmidt & Brown, 2015:4). Section 6 is focused upon striving to “improve the quality of healthcare, care and support through continuing professional development. This is achieved through, section 6.2, participating in “continuing professional development to achieve competencies required for your role.” Section 6.4 urges you to “improve the quality and safety of the care you provide” and 6.6, to “contribute to the learning and development of others as appropriate.” For nursing associates, the NMC (2018) code also states in Section 25.1 that you must “identify priorities, manage time, staff and resources effectively and deal with risk to make sure that the quality of care or service you deliver is maintained and improved. Through analysing proposed changes to working practices using tools such as the SWOT analysis tool, support workers and nursing associates will be assisted to make good, well founded decisions in how care and services can be improved. Knowing the strengths of that decision and the opportunities it will present. They will also be empowered to voice their concerns when a change is not in their patient’s best interests, recognising the weaknesses, and by recognising the external threats they will be better placed to overcome them.

Undertaking a SWOT Analysis

Before you start you need to identify what it is you are going to analyse. Sale (2005) states that first of all you need to assess the current situation. What are the drivers and levers for change? Has something occurred to prompt you or your department to consider change or to make a decision? This may be a whole range of things, such as incidents, complaints, new research, or a development in best practice.

The whole department, including support workers and nursing associates, should meet to perform a SWOT analysis. This is done by examining the four categories, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The order and positioning of the four categories in the grid is deliberate (See fig. one). The top two categories of strengths and weaknesses are directed internally at the individual, team, department or organisation. Wherever, or whoever, the change or decision is aimed at. The bottom two categories of opportunities and threats are aimed at the external environment (Phillips, 2009). Together with this, the left hand two categories of strengths and opportunities are positives whereas the right hand two of weaknesses and threats are negatives. As Thompson (2012:216) states this is useful as it “helps

us to provide a balanced overview of the situation we are analysing,” and not just to focus on the negatives.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Fig One. SWOT Analysis Tool.

Strengths

This is the first of the two positive areas and is looking internally. Strengths could be the things that make you or your team stand out from other areas. What do you do well and excel at? Are your skills, knowledge and experience you have a strength? The training you have received to support you in fulfilling your role and in meeting the organisations objectives. These strengths could be identified from good evaluations received or patient feedback.

Weaknesses

The first negative area and again internally looking is weaknesses. Are there areas of your organisation, team or even on the individual level which you can recognise as being weak? Are there things missing? This could even be around reputation or image, or deficiencies in accommodation or outdated technology (Mullins, 2013). It could also be on a more practical level of staff shortages, positions not filled, work load, morale of the team, or actual working conditions.

Opportunities

This is the second positive area but now is outward facing. What opportunities are there outside of your team or organisation? Is there a need being generated by patient expectations, or new guidelines which you could adopt? Is there something

new that you could start doing? Could new funding be accessed that has previously been unavailable (Phillips, 2009)? This is your chance to identify a new direction, or new service you could be delivering to meet a previously unmet need. Maybe a new technique has been identified to provide care in an improved way? Opportunities could also be experiences gained outside of the current team, which as yet have been unused (Jackson & Thurgate, 2011). Have team member's talents been unrecognised and unused until now?

Threats

The last area is negative and outward facing. This is more serious. It is about identifying things which could actually threaten your practice, service or organisation. Are there things out there, external, which could impact negatively on how you provide your service or care? Threats to the organisation or team could be a loss or decrease in budget, or a change in political or societal drivers which may threaten commissioning of the service in the future (Phillips, 2009). Is another organisation providing care in a more productive way?

Analysis

This is the most important part of the process. For the analysis to be worthwhile, time needs to be given to complete the four sections above as fully as possible. As Pettinger (2012:24) states nothing should be off limits, only "once everything is in front of people, evaluations and judgements can then be made." Once recorded you need to be able to tell what the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are telling you. If done too quickly or as a tick box exercise, there is a risk that SWOT may have been performed, but without the analysis (Thompson, 2012), making the exercise worthless. Thompson (2012) goes on to say that once words have been inputted into the four areas, you are then able to see if there are any patterns or themes emerging. Issues previously unrecognised can be acknowledged and discussed, making the decision making process easier and highlighting the drivers for change.

Conclusion.

So to conclude, this article has highlighted the usefulness of the SWOT analysis tool, in supporting an individual, team or department to identify opportunities for change. Support workers and nursing associates will often know more about how a team and department is performing, being the key staff members delivering the most hands on care. They are therefore well placed to contribute the most to a SWOT analysis of the clinical area, suggesting how strengths can be maximised, weaknesses improved upon, opportunities grasped and threats neutralised. All this will help to deliver quality care and services to the patients and families that we serve and support.

Key Points:

1. Support workers are key to identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within their own working environments.
2. Time needs to be devoted to completing the four areas so that it does not become a tick box exercise.
3. Thinking about an area using SWOT allows you to have a balanced view of both the positives and negatives, looking both inward and outward.
4. The most important stage is the analysis of the four categories, without which the tool is useless.
5. Once your analysis of the SWOT has taken place, you can then make better decisions and changes to benefit both staff and patient care.

Reflective Questions For Your Continuing Professional Development

- In a small group of your peers, conduct a SWOT analysis of your team or department.
- Identify possible changes you can make to build upon your strengths, or to remove or diminish any weaknesses.
- As an individual perform a SWOT analysis examining your own personal learning and development.

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